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SUBJECT: RAHUL PROVIDES STAR POWER, CONGRESS REAFFIRMS
NUCLEAR POWER

REF: A. NEW DELHI 5047
[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 4700
[1](#)C. KOLKATA 0351
[1](#)D. KOLKATA 0345
[1](#)E. KOLKATA 0340

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Rahul Gandhi generated the buzz and excitement for party faithful at his official coming out party at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting on November 17. Beside the celebration of Rahul (Refs A,B), the party strongly supported Congress President Sonia Gandhi,s and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,s commitment to the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement. With the Left acquiescing to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) talks, both Congress leaders ducked mentioning the Nandigram violence (Refs C,D,E). And, signaling a shift in Congress Party ambitions, Mrs. Gandhi urged party members to restore Congress to its former dominance while accepting the necessity of coalition politics in the short term. End Summary.

Clear Message on Civil Nuclear Agreement

[1](#)2. (U) Ahead of the Parliamentary debate on the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement and continuing UPA-Left sparring on the issue, the Congress Party strengthened Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,s hand by providing him an unambiguous party position in support of the agreement. The omnibus resolution adopted by the AICC at its general body meeting on November 17 noted the agreement & would end India,s nuclear isolation in the international nuclear community and will enable it to access technology more easily so as to significantly increase the contribution of nuclear energy to our electricity supply over the next two decades. The AICC has no doubt that the nuclear agreement protects India,s fundamental strategic interests in every way.8

[1](#)3. (U) Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and PM Singh strongly defended the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement in front of the party faithful at the AICC meeting. Mrs. Gandhi argued that the deal would provide India raw material and new

technology and not affect the country's strategic nuclear program. She acknowledged differences of opinion within the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) but said she hoped consensus would be reached. PM Singh reiterated that the agreement in no way subjugates India's foreign policy and labeled such allegations "totally false." The Nehru-Gandhi legacy, he stated, was "in itself a guarantee that no one can bend India in any direction." To demonstrate the party's independence, the AICC resolution spoke of Mrs. Gandhi's recent trip to China and the Prime Minister's visit to Russia, as well as recent agreements with Muslim countries.

Steered Clear of Nandigram

14. (SBU) Notably absent from the remarks of both PM Singh and Mrs. Gandhi was the recent violence in Nandigram. The violence was deplored by lower level functionaries and officially censured by the omnibus AICC resolution passed at the session. However, the resolution refrained from naming the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) outright, instead condemning "the culture of violence and the cult of armed cadres." Observers agreed, Congress is loathe to offend CPM, especially now that a little daylight has opened on the nuclear agreement with the Left parties allowing the GOI to approach the IAEA. Besides, the Congress is content to let others, including the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian civil society, fiercely take on the CPM on Nandigram.

Coalition Politics: Recapturing Political Space

NEW DELHI 00005054 002 OF 003

15. (SBU) On domestic politics, the highlights of the AICC were Sonia Gandhi's remarks on coalition politics, where she walked a tightrope. She acknowledged the difficulty of running a coalition but reaffirmed the party's commitment to working within the present coalition structure. That said, she looked ahead to a coalition-free future when she urged her party to work to return Congress to its former glory. In calling for a rejuvenation of the party she stated, "working in coalition does not mean that we lose our political space forever." She singled out three states where coalition partners hold sway and the Congress Party in almost non-existent -- West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu -- as the most difficult challenges and exhorted the party to resolve their internal problems and rebuild itself in these states. UPA coalition members seemed to take the comments in stride noting that at a party session, "party leaderships have to play to the gallery."

16. (U) The Congress Party also lashed out at the BJP, accusing the opposition of obstructionist tactics and claiming that Gandhian values are under attack in Gujarat and other BJP-ruled states. On the civil nuclear agreement, the AICC resolution noted that the party needed no lessons from anyone in pursuing India's independent foreign policy.⁸ The BJP immediately hit back, accusing the Congress Party of attempting to divert the country's attention from a litany of UPA failures. The BJP spokesman ridiculed the Congress for its silence on Nandigram and accused it of being soft on terrorism. He also complained that public television's broadcast of Sonia Gandhi's address to the AICC was improper and could pose an electoral code violation prior to polls in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh.

Highlighted Economic Achievements

17. (SBU) In a departure from previous tactics, Congress did not shy away from showcasing economic progress achieved during its current run. It drew a distinction between its record of 8.6% average growth with the 5.8% average growth of the previous BJP-led NDA government. In its resolution, the

party reaffirmed its commitment to entrepreneurship and the private sector. Fears of party strategists that any talk of &India Shining& would not play well appear to have been allayed, at least for the moment. Recognizing that price levels of essential commodities will always remain a critical electoral issue, the Congress party called on the UPA government to &exhaust all options& before passing on international price increases to consumers. The Prime Minister responded: &The Congress President has told me time and again that we should control inflation. I can assure you that the government will do its best.&

Comment: Rahul Headlines, Sonia Provides the Substance

18. (SBU) As a coming out party for Rahul Gandhi, the AICC meeting on November 17 was yet one more step in his continuing coronation (ref A). While feting Rahul Gandhi, the Congress party also accomplished some tough political work. In particular, it successfully walked the fine line between coalition politics and party cheerleading. At the 2003 AICC meeting in Shimla, Sonia Gandhi had signaled the Congress Party,s readiness to work within coalitions, a major departure and a humbling come-down for a party accustomed to governing with a free hand. At the 2007 AICC meeting, Sonia Gandhi, while not junking the coalition mantra, laid down a marker when she announced her intent to rebuild the party to its old glory and not to concede even places like West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. On the Parliamentary stage, Nanidgram has given the UPA room to maneuver and Congress did not fail to claim the space. The reins aren't quite Rahul's yet and the nuclear agreement

NEW DELHI 00005054 003 OF 003

isn't quite complete yet, but both are one step closer. End
Comment
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